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Carter's CIA choice (as amended)

When it comes to making such sensitive appointments as head of the Central Intelligence Agency, President Carter appears to be a quick study. His first choice for the post, Theodore Sorensen, a one-time conscientious objector and occasional leaker of secrets, got a cold reception from the Senate and the military and withdrew; his second nominee, Adm. Stansfield Turner, appears to be Mr. Sorensen's direct opposite in everything but scholarship, and is likely to impress senators on both sides of the aisle.

Adm. Turner, a 53-year-old native of Highland Park, Ill., has good credentials for the job. He is commander of allied forces in southern Europe and former head of the Naval War College; he has served as director of systems analysis under the chief of naval operations, and has a reputation as a military analyst. He commanded naval units in Vietnamese waters during the Indochina war, headed a carrier task group in the Mediterranean in 1970 and 1971, and commanded the Second Fleet in 1974. He is regarded by his colleagues in the Navy as an original thinker with a bent for shaking up procedures when they seem to be settling too rigidly into a pattern.

What we have seen of Adm. Turner's views confirms that assessment. In an article in the January issue of Foreign Affairs Quarterly, he argues for a more sophisticated approach toward what he regards as the Navy's fundamental goal—keeping sea lanes open to the United States and its allies and preventing the Soviet Union from restricting their use.

What is needed, Adm. Turner writes, is a "focus on trends rather than statistics"; a concentration on keeping the Navy capable of carrying out its major missions, rather than comparing raw totals of ships, missiles, and planes. The article includes a pointed warning to Defense Department spokesmen against overstating the Soviet threat as a way of persuading Congress to increase military budgets. "A doomsday picture convincingly drawn for a congressional budgetary committee," he writes, "may negatively influence other nations' perceptions of our naval effectiveness." (President Theodore Roosevelt stated the same principle rather more succinctly: "Speak softly and carry a big stick.")

Adm. Turner, in sum, appears to be an analyst who does not take statistics as the final standard of truth, is well aware of the need for accurate intelligence, and is a demanding boss unlikely to let himself be talked into undercover political projects of the kind that have weakened the CIA in the past.

The Senate Intelligence Committee will of course scrutinize Adm. Turner's views and background thoroughly. It's good to note that after an initial bobble, Mr. Carter has recovered nicely and has made an impressive choice for the CIA post. His choice of two such opposite candidates leaves us in some doubt, though, as to how Mr. Carter really wants the CIA to be run. It would help to have some assurance from him that his assessment of Adm. Turner is the same as ours—and that that is why he picked him.